TESTIMONY OF ROBYN THORSON, REGIONAL DIRECTOR, U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE, DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR, BEFORE THE HOUSE COMMITTEE ON TRANSPORTATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE SUBCOMMITTEE ON WATER RESOURCES AND ENVIRONMENT REGARDING GREAT LAKES WATER QUALITY IMPROVEMENT AND ECOSYSTEM RESTORATION

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Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee, I am Robyn Thorson, Regional Director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's (Service) Midwest Region. I am pleased to appear before you today to discuss the role of the Service in Great Lakes water quality improvement and ecosystem restoration. My statement will address this agency's continuing work on environmental restoration, shoreline protection, and wetland restoration and protection in the Great Lakes basin for the benefit of fish, wildlife, and the people of this country.

The Service is the primary federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting and enhancing fish, wildlife and plants and their habitats. Through its programs and partnerships with others, the Service supports continued efforts toward water quality improvement and ecosystem restoration in the Great Lakes and surrounding waters.

Before I address issues specific to the Service, Let me take a moment and highlight specific action affecting Great Lakes restoration efforts taken by the Administration just this week. Continuing to build on the Administration's successful use of collaboration and coordination to achieve environmental success, President Bush signed an Executive Order (EO) on Tuesday of this week creating the Great Lakes Interagency Task Force which, under the lead of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), brings together ten agencies – including the Service –along with states, local governments, and Indian tribes from the region, to provide strategic direction on Great Lakes policy, priorities, and programs. The Service looks forward to participating in this important process.

My testimony today focuses on the Service's important role in improving Great Lakes water quality. Let me begin by citing some examples of what we are doing.

The Service is a leader in reducing contaminants in the Great Lakes, and protecting and restoring watershed quality, through our Natural Resource Damage Assessment and Restoration (NRDAR) Program. For example, at Saginaw River and Bay in Michigan, we led the multi-party Trustee Council that removed more than 340,000 cubic yards of contaminated sediment from the river before it reached the Great Lakes. We also restored nearly 400 acres of coastal wetland and lakeplain prairie, and protected more than 1,600 acres of habitat from development that might have harmed water quality.

Likewise, the Service has promoted NRDAR settlements which are leading to even *more* extensive remediation and restoration efforts in both the Fox River/Green Bay watershed and Grand Calumet Harbor watersheds of the Great Lakes. In implementing these projects, the Service works with diverse partners including other federal agencies, states, tribes, public interest groups, corporations, and private landowners to achieve restoration goals.

I would like to take this opportunity to recognize the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) as an effective partner in water quality and ecosystem restoration activities, in the Great Lakes and around the Midwest. The Service has been working closely with the Biological Resources Division of USGS, as well as the EPA, on both regional and national levels to develop water quality criteria that protect the most sensitive species, including those that are listed as threatened or endangered. The Service continues to provide data and advice to the EPA on effective implementation of its Great Lakes Water Quality Initiative.

The Service monitors the health of the Great Lakes ecosystem and participates in development of indicators that allow agencies and partners to prioritize and coordinate their efforts for greatest efficiency. We are a participant in the "State of the Lakes Ecosystem Conferences" (SOLEC) that are held every two years in response to the bi-national Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement. We have an active role in the continuing SOLEC by helping to develop indicators that represent the state of major ecosystem components across the Great Lakes basin. Some of the indicators that we are working with include bio-indicators of health for lake trout, coaster brook trout, and scud; contaminants in colonial nesting waterbirds; contaminants affecting productivity of bald eagles; assessing the status of Great Lakes islands; and lake sturgeon restoration.

As identified in the Aquatic Nuisance Prevention and Control Act of 1990 (P.L. 101-646) and by the White House (Executive Order 13112, Invasive Species, February 1999), aquatic invasive species are seen as a growing national problem requiring federal action. In this context, the bi-national sea lamprey control program represents an effective, comprehensive strategy contributing to restoration goals for the Great Lakes. It is administered through the Great Lakes Fishery Commission and implemented by the Service, USGS, Canada's Department of Fisheries and Oceans, and many other partners. In operation since 1955, this program is delivering effective control of one of the most damaging invasive species in North America.

The Great Lakes Fish and Wildlife Restoration Act, initially authorized by Congress in 1990, has enabled the Service to facilitate partnerships with a wide range of federal, tribal, state, and local governments and private entities, as well as with Canada, to create a basin-wide program to assess the ecological status of the Great Lakes. Projects supported by the Service under the Act include the design of geographic information systems describing the state of fish and wildlife habitats in the Lake Huron and Lake Erie basins, and studies of issues such as the occurrence of Botulism type E in Lake Erie.

Finally, the Service assists private landowners, townships, county governments, tribes, and others with projects that benefit water quality as well as fish and wildlife resources. Through our Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program, the Coastal Program and Fish

Passage Program, the Service provides technical and funding assistance for locally led projects. For example, the Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program is a voluntary program that works with private landowners, tribal interests, organizations, local communities, and corporations to restore, enhance and protect habitats on their properties for birds, fish, and plants. Since its inception in 2000, the Great Lakes Coastal Program has restored and protected nearly 2,000 acres of coastal habitat in the Great Lakes.

In addition, the Service manages ten National Wildlife Refuges located along the shores of the Great Lakes for the benefit of fish and wildlife resources. Through our management of these lands we work with adjacent landowners, local governments, and other partners to conserve and restore fish and wildlife and their habitats.
These programs implement Great Lakes priorities that have positive, local impacts on water quality and fish and wildlife habitat. The benefits of our wetland conservation and stream habitat restoration projects include reduction of sediment transport within the Great Lakes basin, improvement in water quality, flood control, and Great Lakes shoreline protection. More than half of all U.S. adults hunt, fish, bird watch or photograph wildlife. The Great Lakes states gain economic benefits from these recreational activities. For example, in our 8 Great Lakes basin states, there are over 10 million anglers who spend over 6 billion dollars a year and over 4 million hunters who spend almost 5 billion dollars a year.

In closing, Mr. Chairman, the Service, through its programs and partnerships with others, supports continued efforts in water quality improvement and ecosystem restoration in the Great Lakes and surrounding waters. We are often called upon to support protection of ecologically important coastal areas and wetland restoration, and elimination or modification of barriers to allow passage of fish in Great Lakes waterways.
We are committed to working with its many partners to ensure healthy fish and wildlife resources in the Great Lakes and to enhance and restore the health of this ecosystem. The system faces many threats – from invasive species to contaminants to loss of coastal habitats. The Service stands ready to continue its leadership role in fish and wildlife restoration and to expand its work with partners to make the world's largest freshwater ecosystem a balanced and healthy environment.

This concludes my testimony. I appreciate the opportunity to appear before the Subcommittee, and I would be pleased to answer any questions you have.